

2015 Governor's Arts Awards

The Montana Arts Council announced that five exceptionally talented and accomplished artists and arts organizations are slated to receive the Governor's Arts Award in a ceremony at the State Capitol in Helena, 3 p.m. June 5.

The Governor's Arts Award honors outstanding citizens and organizations in Montana whose achievements in the arts, or on behalf of the arts, benefit all Montanans. Artists Lela Autio and Theodore Waddell, author Debra Magpie Earling, Great Falls Symphony conductor and music director Gordon Johnson, and the Missoula Art Museum are this year's honorees.

Gov. Steve Bullock will preside over the ceremony in the Capitol's Old Supreme Court Chambers. "Montana has a rich history of artists who have told the story of our state through music, sculpture, painting, writing and performances," Bullock said. "It's my honor to recognize these artists and institutions that build on our heritage and share their passion with the next generation of Montanans."

Lela Autio

Lela Autio, described as "a pioneer of Modernism in Montana," grew up in Great Falls and attended Montana State College in Bozeman, where she met her future husband, Rudy Autio.

The couple moved to Helena and worked with Peter Voulkos to establish the Archie Bray Foundation, before heading to Missoula in 1957 when Rudy was hired to teach ceramics at The University of Montana.

Lela earned a master's in art from UM in 1961, and infused generations of kids with her passion for art-making, teaching three years with Head Start, 10 years at Hellgate High School, and a year in Bozeman as an artist in the schools.

She's also put considerable time and energy into her community, initiating playground projects at Rattlesnake and Lincoln schools; and helping transform the former Carnegie Library into the Missoula Art Museum, an endeavor that earned her a MAM Award in 2011.

A retrospective of her work was shown at the MAM in 2000 and again at the Holter Museum in Helena in 2003; and her work was included in the first MAM Triennial.

In nominating Autio for the Governor's Arts Award, ceramic artist Josh DeWeese praises her art-making and advocacy, community activism, and devotion to her family.

"Lela has played an important role in the development of the contemporary art scene in Montana," he writes. "Her work has always challenged the traditional ideas of western representational art prevalent in the state, from the early abstract paintings, to the fabric 'pop art' sculpture created in the 70s, to the latest bold primary-colored plexiglass assemblages."

In addition, "Lela has always been the unquestionable matriarch of her remarkable family," raising a family of four and nurturing her husband's career as an internationally known artist.

DeWeese notes that she was a founding member of the Montana Institute of the Arts, and served on the MSU School of Art Advisory Council. “She has been a role model and inspiration for countless young artists in the state, particularly women.”

Debra Magpie Earling

Caroline Patterson, who nominated Debra Earling for the Governor’s Arts Award, lauds James Welch, N. Scott Momaday and D’Arcy McNickle for writing important stories about growing up as an American Indian. “But Debra Earling carried this vision even further, for me, because her books reveal the darkness, complexity, music, and tragedy experienced by Salish women.”

The author was born in Spokane and grew up in Montana, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation. She dropped out of school at 15, received her GED from Spokane Community College, and at 18, became the first public defender in the reservation’s Tribal Justice System.

Two years later, she enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle, and earned her bachelor’s degree in English. She went on to earn a master’s in English and a MFA in fiction at Cornell University in New York. She’s now a professor at The University of Montana where she teaches fiction and Native American Studies.

Perma Red, published in 2002, received awards for Best Novel of the West and Best First Novel from the Western Writers Association (WWA), as well as the American Book Award, the Mountain and Plains Bookseller Association Award and a WILLA Literary Award.

Her work also includes *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea*, a 2010 collaboration with photographer Peter Rutledge Koch that re-invents the life of Sacajewea. Her stories have appeared in many magazines and collections, including *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*, *Talking Leaves: Contemporary Native American Short Stories* and *Montana Women Writers: A Geography of the Heart*.

She is the recipient of a 2007 Guggenheim Fellowship, has given talks around the world for the U.S. State Department, and taught at numerous conferences.

Through her teaching, speaking and writing, Earling “exposes whole worlds beneath our feet,” writes Patterson. “Her powerful voice and vision have opened the door for numerous other young women and, in particular, young American Indian women to reveal their voices and visions.”

Gordon Johnson

Gordon J. Johnson is the dynamic conductor and music director of the Great Falls Symphony, a position he has held for 33 years.

During Maestro Johnson's tenure, he also served for 15 years as music director/conductor of the Glacier Symphony (Kalispell), was conductor and music director of the Flathead Music Festival for nine years, and helped found the Montana Association of Symphony Orchestras (MASO), and its annual Young Artist Competition.

In addition to his responsibilities in Great Falls, Johnson maintains a busy schedule as guest conductor of orchestras throughout the United States, Canada, England, Japan, Germany and France. He is currently president of the Conductors Guild, an organization dedicated to serving the artistic and professional needs of conductors.

His commitment also extends to future generations of young musicians. He is conductor of the Great Falls Youth Orchestra and served as the director of orchestras at the Red Lodge Music Festival from 2006-11. He's also served as an adjudicator and guest conductor of district and state music festivals, both at the high school and university level.

Johnson has been instrumental in bringing world-renowned concert artists to audiences in Great Falls, including Yo Yo Ma, Itzhak Perlman, Midori, Sir James Galway, Evelyn Glennie and Joshua Bell. And he was a driving force behind the commissioning of "The Journals of Lewis and Clark" by Dan Bukvich for the 40th anniversary of the Great Falls Symphony Association. This composition continues to be performed throughout the Northwest.

"Even though he has had other opportunities, Gordon has chosen to remain in Montana because he came here to 'make a difference,'" writes his nominator Bill Larson. "He certainly has."

"Gordon feels strongly that in this electronic, high-tech, digital age, it is important for Montana audiences to hear live musicians perform acoustic music of the masters as well as experience the music of contemporary composers," writes Larson. "He has maintained this balance for 33 years in Great Falls."

Theodore Waddell

Artist Theodore Waddell exemplifies the phrase 'Montana painter,'" writes nominator Robyn Peterson, executive director of the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, who believes he "has done more than any other living painter to develop a distinctive Montana-based vision that brings Modernism into the 21st century."

The artist was born in 1941 in Billings, and raised in Laurel. He studied with Isabelle Johnson, Montana's first modernist painter, before earning a scholarship to study at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. He received his MFA from Wayne State University.

Waddell's sophisticated modernist paintings have attracted widespread recognition. "As a working rancher, he knows whereof he paints," writes Peterson. "There is no distance from, or fleeting relationship with, his subject ... he knows it."

He also creates sculpture, and according to Peterson, "it's this body of work that's more apt to reveal humor, irony, and social critique."

His work is included in the permanent collections of the Denver Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Booth Museum of Western Art, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, and the National Museum of Wildlife Art, among others. Recent solo exhibitions have included the Albany Museum in Georgia, Gail Severn Gallery in Ketchum, ID, Altamira Fine Art in Jackson, WY, Visions West Gallery in Bozeman, and the Art Museum of Eastern Idaho in Idaho Falls.

“His work is painterly and masterful, and the zeal with which it is snapped up by collectors nationwide is testimony to the maturity of his vision and the quality of the work,” writes Peterson.

He’s also generous to, and supportive of, younger generations of artists, and has been an avid collector of others’ work, much of which he has donated to the state’s public collections.

“Few artists have done as much to align this place – Montana – with incisive and original art and with the larger art world,” notes Peterson. His success has helped build “the growing reputation Montana has as fertile ground for artists.”

Missoula Art Museum

This year marks the Missoula Art Museum's 40th anniversary as a leading contemporary visual arts organization in Montana. Originally an Andrew Carnegie public library from 1903-'74, the building became a contemporary art museum in 1975.

From those humble beginnings, the MAM still remains free to the public and continues to grow and operate as a public educational institution celebrating contemporary art. "Art4All" and "Free Admission/Free Expression" are slogans frequently used to express its community ethic.

MAM reinvented itself in 2003 with a building expansion project and capital campaign, which brought the museum’s contemporary art programming, educational outreach, and overall public service to a new threshold. A major interior renovation was completed, the staff expanded, and both the professionalism and scope of exhibitions and public programming were refined.

During this time, MAM also completed a rigorous process to get re-accredited by the Association of Accredited Museums (AAM); and participated in the American Association of Museum’s Museum Assessment Program (MAP), which concluded that the museum is perceived “as a leader, a cultural asset, and an integral part of the fabric of downtown Missoula.”

Among its outreach programs and accomplishments:

- The Fifth Grade Art Experience serves Missoula County Public School teachers and students.

- MAM is dedicated to showcasing the work of contemporary artists from the American West with two dedicated areas of focus: Contemporary American Indian artists and art; and 20th Century modern art movements, particularly Montana Modernism.

- MAM produces an average of 25 exhibitions annually, presenting approximately 300 artists each year, as well as national and international exhibitions, including “Under Pressure: Contemporary Prints from the Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer and his Family Foundation,” and a collection of original photographs by Ansel Adams.

Last year the museum served 36,260 visitors on-site and 48,615 off-site with traveling exhibitions. Now entering its 40th year, the MAM has matured into an institutional anchor for the city, state, region, and the West, helping ensure the development of new generations of artists to come.